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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENNAI 000248

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [ECON](#) [ELAB](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: CHILD LABOR PERSISTS IN SOME PARTS OF FORMAL FIREWORKS  
INDUSTRY

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Three children died in an explosion at a licensed fireworks factory near Madurai in southern Tamil Nadu. The factory was in violation of a number of regulations at the time of the accident, including India's prohibition against employing children in the manufacture of explosives. The factory owner has been arrested and his license to produce fireworks suspended, but local observers expect that the politically influential owner will ultimately get off easy. The incident shows that child labor still exists in at least some parts of the formal sector of the fireworks industry in Tamil Nadu. End summary.

Children die in explosion at fireworks factory  
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¶2. (U) Nineteen people, including three children, died in an explosion at the V.B.M. fireworks factory near Madurai, in southern Tamil Nadu on July 7. The children who died ranged from 14 to 16 years old. As many as 21 others, including several children, suffered injuries in the accident. The mishap took place at a fireworks manufacturing facility in Vadakampatti, located approximately 25 miles from Madurai. Two more accidents at fireworks factories in the same region (on July 20 and 28) killed a total of 13 people, but there were no children among the fatalities.

¶3. (SBU) V.B.M. Fireworks has been in operation since first receiving a license in 1963. The facility was in violation of numerous regulations when the accident occurred, including exceeding permitted work hours, failing to maintain proper records, and lacking proper fire exits. V.B.M. also violated Indian law by employing children between 14 and 16 years of age. Although V.B.M. did not violate India's child labor law, which bars children under 14 years of age from working in hazardous industries (including fireworks manufacture), the company did run afoul of the Explosives Act's prohibition against children between 14 and 18 working in fireworks manufacture. The company had employed children between the ages of 14 and 16. A local journalist alleged that V.B.M. was able to continue operations by "greasing the palms of government officials." A member of the Campaign Against Child Labor (CACL) also contended that the owner bribed local officials by giving them free fireworks. He told post that he believed that between 30 and 40 children worked at the factory, earning about one dollar a day for working four hours a day after school.

Owner arrested, likely to get off easy  
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¶4. (SBU) The Superintendent of Police for Madurai district confirmed many of the code violations at the factory. The factory's owner was arrested and V.B.M.'s license suspended. The owner has been charged with a variety of offenses under the Indian Penal Code including sections 304A (death by negligence); 286 (negligent conduct with respect to explosive substance); 337 (causing hurt by act endangering life or personal safety of others); and 338 (causing grievous hurt by act endangering life or personal safety of others), as well as offenses under the Indian Explosives Act. The CACL

representative noted that charges did not include the factory's violation of the Explosives Act's bar against child labor, and speculated that the owner would soon be released because of his powerful connections in the local government.

USG project sought to stop child labor in fireworks industry

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15. (U) India's fireworks industry has a long history of employing children. Ninety percent of the country's fireworks are produced in and the around the city of Sivakasi in Virudunagar district, which adjoins Madurai district (where the V.B.M. facility is located). In light of the industry's child labor problem, the joint U.S.-India INDUS Child Labor project targeted some areas of Virudunagar district, which also has a large matchstick industry. The INDUS project, which ended on March 31, 2009, exceeded its initial target of removing 4,000 children from the Virudunagar fireworks and matches industries, ultimately removing from employment more than 5,000 children according to preliminary reporting (the final project document has not been completed).

16. (SBU) The CACL representative estimated that ten percent of the Sivakasi's fireworks and matches workforce is composed of children. He said that children work after school and during holidays. Fireworks manufacturers, he said, usually use children to package finished fireworks but they also sometimes have the children fill the fireworks casings with explosives.

17. (SBU) Comment: The fireworks industry defends itself by claiming that only unlicensed, informal fireworks producers violate the prohibition against child labor in fireworks production. But the tragic death of three children in the explosion at V.B.M.

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Fireworks -- which was properly licensed -- demonstrates the existence of child labor in at least some fireworks manufacturers in the formal sector. As is sadly true for other social ills confronting India, poverty, corruption, and weak law enforcement continue to remain obstacles to eliminating the problem of child labor. End comment.

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